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ABSTRACT

The use of correspondence or home study courses for noncredit is a recent development in the field of adult education. The challenge facing the extension worker is to be able to develop and deliver the type of program that not only meets the learning (content) need of the participant but that also meets the learning situation. Unfortunately, the dropout rate in home study/correspondence courses has been high in relation to other traditional forms of learning activity. The extension worker must develop educational packages strong enough to provide the secondary motivations that will result in continued learner participation. A course to train fertilizer dealers was designed to motivate the individual learner by creating a "human interest" focus in the material presented. The course provided theoretical information relating to soil science. Assignments were developed in a manner that allowed course participants to respond as if they were providing information in relation to a farm couple's enterprise. Their written recommendations were assessed by a professional agrologist and returned with evaluative comments. The final exam was also built around the three families and the questions related to farming practices on their farms. The evaluations of the course indicated that the participants found the "humanistic" approach to be a positive learning motivator. (YLB)

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"HUMANIZING HOME STUDY"

A paper prepared for presentation at the Canadian Society of Extension Annual Meeting at London, Ontario

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August 25, 1987

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"Humanizing Homestudy"*

Abstract

Providing learners with the opportunity to study at home is not a new concept. Indeed many older and middle aged Canadians can well recall correspondence courses. This is especially true for those who lived in remote communities where no high schools existed. More recently opportunities in non-credit learning have been provided. These courses provide the opportunity to learn at home at a time when it is convenient. As well, the adult learner is able to study while carrying on with normal activities relating to jobs, parental responsibilities and social interaction. Despite these advantages there continues to be a large dropout rate among individuals who enroll in home study programs.

The course **"This Land"** was designed to motivate the individual learner by creating a "human interest" focus in the material presented. The course provided theoretical information relating to soil science. The assignments were developed in a manner that allowed each course participant to respond as if they were providing information in relation to a farm couple's enterprise. Their written recommendations were assessed by a professional agrologist and returned to them with evaluative comments. The final exam was also built around the three farm families and the questions related to farming practices on their farms.

The evaluations of the course indicated that the participants who enrolled in the course found the "humanistic" approach to be a positive learning motivator.

* A paper written by Glen Hass, P.Ag. and Donna Fleury, P.Ag. for the Canadian Society of Extension, August 23 - 26, 1987, London, Ontario

Introduction

The term "correspondence course" may conjur a different image from one adult to another depending upon the satisfaction of the learning experience in that person's past. Many of us who are "pre-baby boomers" will have had some experience with a correspondence course. This is particularly true for those who grew up in remote communities where no high schools existed. It was not until the consolidation of school districts occurred in the late 1950s that students were able to take school buses to attend high schools. In spite of this there are many well educated individuals who received their high school education using the correspondence courses offered by various provincial Departments of Education. As well, many universities have offered courses for credit using a home study mode. Such universities as Athabasca and Waterloo have gained world wide recognition for their correspondence courses. Such course offerings at both the high school and university level have filled an important niche in providing learning opportunities for those who could not attend regular classes for whatever reason.

The use of correspondence courses, or to use the modern term — home study courses, for non-credit is a more recent development in the field of adult education. Early extension workers believed that direct contact with their clients was an essential part of the developmental process. The concept of having to "see the whites of their eyes" before behaviour change could be facilitated was an accepted principle in the field of extension. It is difficult to argue against this given the success of past extension activity. Activities such as Better Farming Trains, Frontier College and various short courses, field days and farm demonstrations were and continue to be important methods for what has become known as "technology transfer". The success of the "warm body" approach was also due in a large part to the diverse nature of the clientele.

Such factors as cultural differences, non-farm backgrounds and ethnic variances created special problems for the extension worker as agriculture emerged into an industry.

The situation today is quite different. Granted many of these differences still exist but to a lesser degree. Farmers of today tend to be more highly educated, have better access to information and have farm experience as a youth.

The offering of non-credit home study programs is fast becoming a major thrust of most adult education units. Indeed the University of Alberta and Alberta Agriculture have been front runners in this area and offer over fifty home study courses directly relating to agriculture and rural topics. The University of Guelph also offers a large number of courses in their home study program.

Other universities, governments and adult education institutions are now developing courses and programs to satisfy the needs of a clientele which has become comfortable with the home study method of learning. This group as described by Davidson (1987) is "younger, better education, have been farming for fewer years, have larger farms and higher gross sales than the average provincial farm population."

Understanding the Participants

Agriculture is a complex business and those who are directly involved either as producers or in a service role find themselves with a busy schedule. It is often very difficult to find time to "fit" into a structured learning experience. As well, there are family, community service and personal interests which compete for an individual's time. Another factor which relates to willingness to participate is past experience in the formal educational system. If this has not been rewarding, there is less likelihood of participating in further educational

opportunities. As Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) point out:

> Adult learning is a complex phenomenon. While it shares commonalities with childhood learning, there are at the same time substantial differences that necessitate approaching adult students differently from school children. The adult's independent self concept, ability to be a self-directed learner, readiness and orientation to learning are interactive factors that help explain not only the great diversity among adult learners, but also many of the commonalities.

The challenge facing the extension worker is to be able to develop and deliver the type of program that not only meets the learning (content) need of the participant but which also meets his learning situation. Two major aspects of extension programming for the agricultural clientele are variability and proficiency. The variability that occurs has implications relating to the individual's ability to learn, his expectations, the topic, the perception of how worthwhile the activity is and past experience.

Proficiency relates to the individuals ability to grasp the materials. This is directly related to a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Both of these must be considered when developing home study courses. The extension workers' role then is not only to provide information, but to facilitate learning.

A great deal of research has been carried out relating to motivating the adult learner. A review of the literature indicates that there are three general reasons for participating in an educational program. The first is to complete a level of education. This type of involvement generally requires one to enroll in some form of credit offering. A second reason is to improve one's performance. This refers to a job related type of learning situation. The third relates to personal interests or learning for the sake of learning. This type of involvement is more difficult to define but would likely be more related to leisure time pursuits.

These are referred to as primary motivators and tend to be important to lead people to enrolling but do not necessarily insure that the person will continue to participate. Secondary motivators relate to such factors as course design, physical and psychological conditions for learning and individual characteristics. Each of these are important motivators and each supports the other two to provide individual motivation for continuing in the learning activity.

The primary motivators apply to any type of learning activity be it a short course, workshop or home study. The influence of the secondary motivators however, vary greatly with the type of activity. In those situations where the extension worker has control of the course design, physical arrangements and individuals who enroll (such as prerequisites or eligibility regulations), the secondary motivators can be managed to provide a positive learning climate. In the case of home study, the course design is the only controllable motivator thus it must be strong enough to withstand detrimental effects which may arise if other secondary motivating factors are not prevalent. Unfortunately the dropout rate in home study/correspondence courses has been high in relation to other traditional forms of learning activity. As Harrington (1977) points out "Correspondence study has been fighting a losing battle against the dropout problem for a century."

If the trend for more home study non-credit offerings continues, the challenge facing the extension worker will be to develop educational packages which will be strong enough to provide the secondary motivations which will result in continued learner participation.

A Case Study in Humanizing Home Study

Early in 1986 a major agricultural company approached the Division of Extension and Community Relations, University of Saskatchewan to determine the feasibility of providing training for their fertilizer dealers in Western Canada.

The company had determined that the dealers needed to know more about the physical and chemical properties of soils, soil conservation, effects of tillage, soil testing and the use of fertilizers.

After an extensive survey, it was found that the prospective participants fit the classical definition of adult learners. They were likely to be working full time, there would be a wide range of age, experience and educational backgrounds. They would be located in various centers throughout the prairies. They would have a great many other committments, such as family, community obligations and personal interests. Finally, they would be primarily motivated by wanting to learn more about soils and fertilizers. This would allow the agents to perform their job better by advising farmers on their fertilizer needs.

The Division of Extension agreed to provide an educational activity which would meet the learning needs and the situational needs of the fertilizer dealers. Certainly a challenge not for the timid!

The decision was made that the only possible way to deliver the program was to develop a home study course. A program design specialist was hired who also had an agricultural degree. Faculty from the Department of Soil Science agreed to be content specialists and faculty from the Division of Extension were available as program design specialists.

It became apparent very early that there was an abundance of information available but it was in various publications, pamphlets and factsheets. To collect this and send out a bundle to each participant would likely result in some frustrations on the part of the participant and most would not be read. To overcome this a content manual was written that was very comprehensive but also very easy to read.

A second conclusion drawn by the developer was that the material alone would not result in any degree of secondary motivation. The decison was made

to develop the course around three fictitious farm families. John and Mary Wyrick lived in the black soil zone near Elm Creek, Manitoba; Mark and Deb Sander farmed in the brown soil zone at Swift Current, Saskatchewan; and Chris and Bill Johnson were located in the dark brown soil zone near Drumheller, Alberta. A 20 minute video tape was developed to introduce the course, bring a message from the company and to introduce the three farm families. The couples were amateur actors and the video showed scenes depicting each of their farms and the characteristics of the area in which they lived.

The course then was developed in a story fashion. It told of how they met at the Farm Progress Show in 1985 and how they continued to visit during 1986 and 1987. The course had five separate chapters, each dealing with a specific topic relating to soils and fertilizers. Each chapter had an assignment to be completed and sent back. Each assignment began with a continuation of the story of the farm families by describing a particular problem relating to their farms. There was also a human interest element added by describing the feelings and relationships of the couples.

The assignments were questions with multiple choice or short answers. They related to specific problems that existed on one of the farms and the decision that should be made by the farmer in consultation with the fertilizer dealer. The following is an example of how the assignments were constructed.

NAME:_____

FEEDBACK:_____

THIS LAND

CHAPTER 2: PROBLEM SOILS, CONSERVATION, TILLAGE AND DRAINAGE

Answer each of the following questions on the paper. Circle the correct answer(s) for the multiple choice questions. The matching and short answer questions should be answered in the space provided.

DECEMBER 1986

As Agribition approached, the Wyricks became excited with the possibility of attending the Western Canadian Agribition in Regina. A couple of phone calls confirmed that they would meet the Johnsons and Sanders at the Sheraton Hotel in Regina.

The Johnsons picked up the Sanders on their way to Agribition. As they travelled along the #1 highway, they passed through the town of Chaplin. Bill was surprised at the amount of salinity in the area. Mark commented that salinity was becoming an increasing problem in several parts of Saskatchewan.

1. The soils that the Johnsons and Sanders were talking about contain a high concentration of soluble salts. What term would be used to define these soils?

a) sodic
b) alkali
c) saline
d) saline-alkali

2. What 4 management practices would you recommend to a farmer with saline soil problems?

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
4) _____

3. Some crops are more tolerant to salinity than others. Which of the following field crops is the most tolerant to salinity?

a) canola
b) soybeans
c) winter wheat
d) 6-row barley

Each assignment was sent out at the first of the month and asked to be returned by the 20th. It was then marked and returned along with the next assignment. This resulted in a "continuing story" effect. This was done on the premise that it would be motivating to send in the assignment to find out what was happening next. (Not unlike the strategy used by the soaps on TV!)

After the five assignments had been returned a final exam was written. The company asked to bring their dealers and agents together in several centers to write this exam. The Division agreed to comply with this request even though the program designers were confident that a final exam could be developed which would assess learning but which could be written at home.

The exams were corrected and the final mark was based on assignments and the final exam. Those who completed the course were given a certificate of completion.

Attempts to Humanize the Course

The following is a summary of the things that were done to make the course an enjoyable learning experience.

1. Course Design:

a) The course was developed with a story format based on three farm families. This provided a human interest aspect.

b) The subject matter was published in one text that was comprehensive and easy to read.

c) The assignments were based on conditions on the families' farms. This provided a simulation of the agent's day-to-day work situation rather than regurgitating the subject matter through memory questions.

2. Packaging

a) The course was packaged in a simple format that was easy to use. At the start of the course each person received a video tape to introduce the course, the farm families and a welcome from the program designers.

b) Assignments were sent out at the beginning of each month along with a self addressed envelope for convenience of the participant. The assignments were easy to read, were printed on colored paper with a different color for each and they were also three hole punched for storage in a ring binder once they had been returned to the participant.

3. Learning Climate

a) Terms which might have negative connotations were avoided. For example, it was called an individual development course not a home study course, as the word study is often negative. The terms marks and assignments were not used. Feedback was used.

b) The program developer was on call every Monday morning so that participants could phone for information, consultation, etc.

c) At the end of each assignment there was a place for participant's comments. As well there was a space for the programmer's comments. This allowed for some form of interchange.

d) Feedback was based on literal descriptions rather than percent or marks. Each participant received information at the beginning of the course as to what was meant by the feedback terms.

e) There was a course midpoint evaluation which provided the opportunity for the participant to comment on the course. There was then a final evaluation of the course which provided a more in depth feedback. Both of these were valuable for modification of the course.

Data On The Participants

- There were 192 participants enrolled in the course. Of these, 62 were from Alberta, 94 from Saskatchewan and 36 from Manitoba.
- There were 183 men and 9 women.
- 69 were under 30 years of age; 80 were from 30 - 39 years; 26 were 40 - 49 years; and 14 were over 50 years of age.
- 3 had less than a high school education while 147 had a high school diploma; 4 had an agricultural diploma; 7 an agricultural degree, 21 had other university degrees and 14 had some other post high school education.
- It was interesting to note that 177 had VCRs while 15 did not. Those who didn't were able to relate to the farm families because of the description in the written material.
- 151 completed the course and 41 dropped out. Of those who dropped out, 5 finished the course but didn't write the final exam.

Conclusions

It is difficult to determine how much effect the attempt to humanize the home study course had on the participants. The fact that nearly 80 percent completed the course would indicate that they felt positive toward it. However, one must also consider that the parent company reimbursed the full tuition to those who completed the course. This would certainly have an affect! The course will be offered in 1987-88 and there will not be a rebate offered. This will make an interesting comparison.

Perhaps more reliable feedback can be identified from the evaluations of the 103 who responded. It indicated that 89 percent found the text easy to read, 83 percent liked having the course built around the farm families and 68 percent found the video helpful.

It is also interesting to note that all of those who responded felt that the assignments were an important part of the course. 68 percent felt that the final exam was important.

Based on the information from a one year offering of the course, it would seem that the design of home study courses is an important consideration and with proper design, other secondary motivating factors can be compensated.

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